5 Lessons from Teaching a Blended Traditional and eLearning Course:
Experiences from Hawassa University (Ethiopia) and the University of Wisconsin (USA)
By Heidi Busse and Fikadu Reta

During a trip to Ethiopia last year, I remember sharing a plate of _injera_ and _shiro_ with Fikadu Reta, Director of Hawassa University's School of Nutrition and Food Science Technology. As we finished eating, he asked me, "What is the most important lesson you learned from community partnerships?"

He knew I had worked with Ethiopian organizations since 2010, managing the UW's Ethiopia Twinning Partnership program. He had managed partnerships with several American universities in that period.

The first thing out of my mouth was: "Time. American partners – especially those from universities – tend to expect immediate change."

Fikadu finished the thought. "Right, but change doesn't often happen right away, especially when we're still building our education and other systems." He then added, "Sometimes, the most important change is what we cannot see."

When applied to teaching partnerships, what criteria can help us determine if our teaching methods result in effective learning? Especially for outcomes difficult to measure within the timespan of a course.
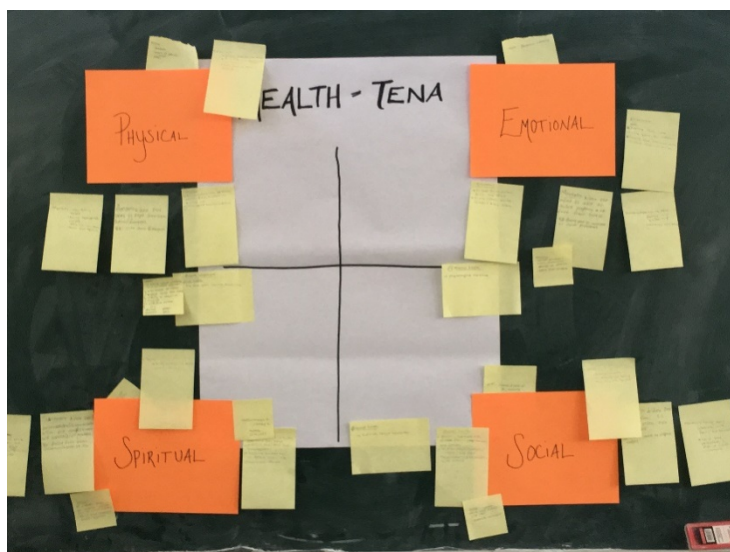
Fikadu and I collaborated this past fall, teaching a research methods course for graduate students in Hawassa University's Applied Human Nutrition (AHN) program. The course ran 10 weeks, starting in November 2017, and 15 students completed it.

During a critical thinking break-out activity, Hawassa University students brainstormed what "being healthy" means to them. They then posted their ideas on the wall and described their ideas to others.

We reflected on our experience. And came up with 5 lessons that may be helpful to other educators doing collaborative, distance-based education.

LESSON 1: BLENDED IS BETTER

The curriculum was adapted from an applied research methods course taught at the UW, but adapted for Hawassa University's AHN program requirements. Lectures were delivered jointly by Heidi, Fikadu, and colleagues from both UW and HU.

Heidi was based in Wisconsin for the majority of the course. Initially, we tried to deliver the lectures using Skype. But low internet bandwidth in Hawassa made live lectures impossible. So then we

recorded lectures at the UW in advance, and emailed them to students together with powerpoint slides. Then, Fikadu met in-person with the class to listen to the recordings, further explain concepts, and help answer some of the students' questions.

While the students could have listened to the recordings individually and at their own pace, they told us they preferred spending time together as a class. So we blended eLearning lectures and online materials with traditional classroom sessions for interactive discussions.

When students listened to recordings together, they could pause and discuss questions. This was the first time most had been exposed to research methods concepts. They benefitted from group discussions to reinforce new terms. It also provided students the social space to listen to classmates' questions so they did not feel isolated.

This was also the first time most students had a class that used online, video-based lectures as a teaching tool. Blending traditional classroom sessions helped ensure all students – even those with limited internet access or IT skills – accessed the lectures and other online materials.

LESSON 2: BE FLEXIBLE WITH INSTRUCTIONAL DELIVERY METHODS

We initially planned to conduct all sessions live via Skype. When we changed to the online delivery method, we needed a platform that would convey the slides and audios.

We worked with a SoHE outreach specialist, Alan, to record the sessions as video files. At first, we sent only videos. But students gave feedback that the videos took too long to download. Then, once videos were downloaded, they sometimes would stop (again, bandwidth issue). What worked best for our students was to send BOTH audio and video files so students could download the audio files on their mobile phones and listen to the lectures repeatedly.

With the audio/video files, we also attached copies of slides. Because many terms were new and students were not familiar with the video and audio based learning, we used a lot of text on the slides as a resource for the students.

LESSON 3: LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

With reliance on technology for delivering eLearning courses, one challenge we as educators face is how to continue to build opportunities for our students to learn from and connect with the surrounding community. We incorporated multiple strategies to promote community engagement for our students because active learning benefits all learners. But also because many of our students were non-traditional (i.e., older), working professionals who came with their own set of life experiences to share.

Some of our interactive and non-classroom learning strategies included:

- Field trips
- Service learning
- Group projects with community organizations
- Community mentors

- Classroom-based activities that required students to work in small groups to solve problems and apply critical thinking skills

Our students participated in an agronomy and nutrition workshop, led by the International Potato Center for rural households from a village in Boricha woreda (district), southern Ethiopia. Here, two of the students are speaking on behalf of the group to share their appreciation and reflection on this

LESSON 4: CONTINUOUS EVALUATION

Our teaching approaches were new for most of the students. So we wanted to ensure we got their feedback from the beginning of the course to make revisions, as needed, rather than wait until mid-way or the end of the course.

We started the course with a baseline evaluation for the students to complete (see snapshot with example questions). It included a self-assessment so students could evaluate their confidence with the course competencies, and an open-ended section to write down their learning goals.

Also, starting in the first session, we encouraged students to share their feedback. Some students gave verbal feedback to Fikadu in class, while others emailed Heidi directly.

One initial comment was difficulty comprehending the audios – students had trouble hearing lecturers' voices and keeping up with their pace. This presents a challenge for the students, as all of their graduate courses were delivered in English. But English was the second (and sometimes third or fourth) language for them, so their vocabulary was limited. Additionally, most had no prior experience with a native English-speaking instructor, so the American accents also posed a challenge.

Snapshot of some of the questions included on baseline assessment.

Our students (15) were selected from among 100+ applicants who took the entrance exam to join Hawassa's Applied Human Nutrition program. Academically, they received top scores. However, English fluency was not one of the entrance exam criteria. Many lacked verbal and written English skills, and were not confident communicating their ideas.

Some of the language problems were not easy to solve during our course. As one student shared, "I would perform better if there were more practical and engaging English language trainings during undergraduate and high school education." Like this student noted, these challenges start much earlier in life and reflect a broader challenge for Ethiopia's education system and different stakeholders (e.g., Ministry of Education, other universities, and primary / secondary schools).

LESSON 5: INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE REFLECTION

One of the new terms students learned during our course was "*reflection*." Which we defined as looking inward at one's personal beliefs, values, and assumptions, with the willingness to critically evaluate and possibly change them.

This was an important new term because most formal education in Ethiopia uses didactic approaches, where students write down notes but often do not discuss their meaning or have an opportunity to question each other or their instructors.

Consider this: an estimated 44% of Ethiopian children are stunted. This number is higher in certain regions and rural areas. And Ethiopia is one of many countries facing the double burden of high rates of undernutrition coupled with growing rates of overweight and obesity. Which is difficult to fathom – especially for many of our students – who themselves grew up in households that regularly faced food and money shortages.

This is just one example of the kinds of challenges our students are tasked with solving. And why we believe it is vital to teach research methods in ways that link the classroom with community.

Students drew community maps of assets important for nutrition. This activity was an example of a participatory research method from the qualitative research methods unit.

We felt it was important to help students learn about not just what research methods are, but how to apply them in ways to transform communities. And used reflection techniques as a tool to look inward

– as individuals and as a class – on our beliefs with a willingness to critically evaluate and possibly change them.

This is not only our belief. Our students express similar views. As one said, "there are a lot of nutrition-related problems in our country. And the problems need interventions that promote the heart of the people."

WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

We started this article asking, "what criteria can help us determine if our teaching methods result in effective learning?" While there are research competencies we hoped all our students gained, one challenge as educators with a social action orientation was how to develop leadership skills of our students? We not only wanted them to gain knowledge about research methods, but more importantly build confidence to apply this knowledge for social action to transform their communities.

This is partly where partnerships are important. We understand we cannot transform the confidence and self-efficacy of our students during a single class during a limited 10-week period. Here are our ideas for how we can continue building upon the relationships and inspirational ideas our students share with us this semester, and continue our shared learning into the future:

➔ Tap into Technology Opportunities

The internet and other web-based technologies present many opportunities to promote global education partnerships. With abundant human, technical, and material resources available in countries like the United States, we need to find ways to more equitably allocate those resources, both to reach all communities in the US but also to support education systems strengthening in countries like Ethiopia.

At the same time, learning is not one-directional in true partnerships. American students, staff, and faculty can learn from other countries and become better global citizens. From our research methods course, joint learning helped both Hawassa and UW start discussing ways to strengthen future collaborations. For example, Heidi is advising two Hawassa MSc students who had difficulty getting a major supervisor because the number of highly qualified nutrition scholars is limited in Ethiopia. This is a start, but we need to involve additional staff in joint teaching and research.

➔ Invite Guest Speakers to Share Experiences and Give Back to Ethiopian Communities

Many international universities and NGOs work in Ethiopia. While these faculty, scientists, and students benefit from data collected from communities, they lack opportunities to give back to Ethiopian communities and local institutions. And the linkages among NGOs, international universities, and Ethiopian research institutions is weak. While teaching this course, Heidi helped invite staff from international research institutes (e.g., the International Potato Center) to share their experiences with the class, mentor students, and give students an opportunity to visit their community sites. This engagement benefitted students by helping build their professional networks and enriched the course content. But it also benefitted the institutions by providing opportunities for all of us to discuss future collaborative research projects, and for Fikadu to develop broader linkages between these institutions and his other teaching staff and students.

➔ Deepen Understanding Between Cultures

We should also share our experiences learning about the cultural differences between our countries. Specifically, differences in graduate level education between Ethiopia and the US. Most of Hawassa University-SNFST teaching staff are guests coming from other institutions (from within Ethiopia as

well as internationally). Thus, the program faces continuous schedule changes, and students need to adapt to the availability of their guest instructors. Flexibility is extremely important in all aspects of teaching, such as planning travel dates, course length, sessions, student assignments and deadlines, and exam times. Another issue that requires cultural understanding is the nature of Ethiopian students and their expectations for class engagement. Many Ethiopian students tend to be reserved, and less confident sharing their ideas or opinions in class out of fear they need to come up with a single, correct answer. This is not just a classroom expectation, but a broader cultural nature. There is a quote in Ethiopia about this,

In Amharic, this means, "silence is gold." How this affects teaching and learning is that students might keep quiet, and an American instructor may think they are not prepared for class. In actuality, the students have a lot of ideas they would like to discuss and share, if given the opportunity.

→ Be Prepared to Be Committed

According to Fikadu, "Heidi showed exemplary character in the way she found ways to come to Hawassa to make the teaching happen. She was in Ethiopia for another meeting, and took additional time to come be with the students."

We faced challenges with transportation getting Heidi from Addis Ababa to Hawassa. We had planned that she would fly, but the airline ticket was impossibly expensive. Thanks to our resilient social networks, Heidi got a lift with a van hauling medical supplies and met Fikadu halfway to Hawassa. This is an indication of our mutual dedication to joint teaching, which often demands such extra efforts outside normal schedules and plans.

→ Find Partners with Shared Values

Our final point is about having shared values, which are the important blocks for building long-term trust and engagement between partners. Commitment and dedication are key to effective partnerships. But they are not the only important qualities. If as co-instructors you find you are working toward different goals or have different ideas of what successful education looks like, it can cause dissatisfaction and block effective collaboration. We were very fortunate to share several values, including open-mindedness so we could closely discuss ideas. Even if we did not agree 100%, we valued learning the others' viewpoint and made informal time for such discussions. We learned a lot from the students and each other. We hope our lessons will lead to stronger collaborations between our students, colleagues, and institutions, and that our lessons may be useful to others who engage in global teaching collaborations.